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TO: The Maryland General Assembly
Senate Finance Committee
Annapolis, Maryland

FROM: Jennifer D. Roberts, DrPH, MPH
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RE: Support Senate Bill 0117

Good Afternoon Chairwoman Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, Senator Ellis, and members of the Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 0117. I am here as an Associate Professor of Kinesiology and Director of the Public Health Outcomes and Effects of the Built Environment Laboratory at the School of Public Health, University of Maryland in College Park. This important legislation will require the "State Highway Administration to collect litter and mow the grass along State highways and certain interstate highways on a consistent and regular basis". Subsequently, Senate Bill 0117 will be considered a supplemental environmental project relating to maintenance along State and interstate highways.

Before I share with you why it is vitally important to support Senate Bill 0117, I will tell you briefly about my background. My work and research examines the impact of built, social, and natural environments, including the institutional and structural inequities of these environments, on the public health outcomes of marginalized communities. More specifically, I examine the dynamic relationship of these environments with physical activity, whether that be leisurely exercise or active transit, like walking or biking, in order to understand complex health outcome patterns, including disparities in the prevalence in obesity or diabetes, among adults and children.

More than 55 years ago, as a pet project of First Lady Bird Johnson, President Lyndon Johnson sighed the Highway Beautification Act. This act encouraged scenic enhancement by providing funding for cleanup and greenspace landscaping along the roadways, however, the first lady believed that beauty had a real social utility. She was quoted as saying "the subject of beautification is like a tangled skein of wool. All the threads are interwoven—recreation and pollution, and mental health, and the crime rate, and rapid transit…and parks… everything leads to something else."

While First Lady Johnson spoke of the interwoven threads of pollution, health and crime, my work as well as the work of others have identified and documented these significant associations through research findings. My research on the relationship between built or man-made environments and physical activity among children living throughout the Maryland, Virginia and Washington DC region found that when there was not a lot of litter on the streets, children were

more than three times likely to play at least one hour a day outside. And this level of physical activity has not only been recommended as the minimum level needed for children by the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, but it translates to numerous positive health outcomes, such as a lower risk of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, depression, cancer, and many more. In addition, adult physical activity research also has revealed that the absence of litter, vandalism and crime and was associated with higher rates of walkability and physical activity and lower rates of obesity.

Other research has also shown how neighborhood disorder, such as the presence of litter, overgrown grass and dense brush, can negatively impact community health. In a group of studies known as The Florida Litter Study, litter has been identified as a major indicator of neighborhood decline and disorder, which ultimately decreased property values and increased crime. Aside from the undeniable issue of aesthetics, litter can cause human health problems by attracting rats or other pests that may carry disease, as well as, wildlife health problems by degrading aquatic and avian habitats. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that un-mowed grasses are associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress for nearby residents. And overgrown grasses along with dense brush have been shown to provide obscure spots and spaces for criminal and illicit activities, including illegal dumping.

Many people don't recognize that the roads we walk and drive on are owned and maintained by the State. I live in Ten Hills, Baltimore, but just a few miles east on Route 40 (Edmondson Avenue) the poverty rate is more than double the rate of Ten Hills. High concentrations of neighborhood disorder are routinely located in poor communities of color and/or socially disadvantaged neighborhoods with marginalized populations. Because I travel Route 40 on a regular basis, I notice how the litter piles up and the grass overgrows due to a lack of timely trash collection and grass mowing east of my Ten Hills neighborhood.

Health disparities exist throughout Maryland. To name a few, there are race-based obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease disparities whereby Black Maryland residents are one in a half to twice as likely to have been diagnosed with these conditions in comparison to White Maryland residents. There is a growing body of literature supporting the argument that well-maintained areas help reduce health disparities by providing safe and activity promoting areas. These areas can also be restorative natural settings to improve psychological well-being for its residents. Therefore, I fully support Senate Bill 0117.

This bill addresses more than just the eyesore of our unkept roads. Senate Bill 0117 will establish the administrative infrastructure needed to promote health and wellness for Maryland residents by upholding and monitoring the maintenance of our State and interstate highways.

Thank you.

Jennifer D. Roberts, DrPH, MPH